

Marking the Score

All¹ musical scores include the basic information the performer will need: note names, duration, and relative timing. But it is often helpful for the performer to add additional information to a score, to expedite the learning process. Which finger should press a given key, for example? What is the name of that note with all the ledger lines? How do the right-hand and left-hand rhythms fit together?

It is easy to simply scribble the answers to such questions “anywhere” on the page. The pianist below has written finger numbers in as close to the notes as possible. Makes sense, right?

A musical score for piano in 3/4 time, consisting of four measures. The right hand plays chords in the first and third measures, and a melodic line in the second and fourth measures. The left hand plays a single note in the first measure, a triplet in the second, and a triplet in the fourth. Handwritten fingerings are placed near the notes: 1, 5, 5 in the first measure; 1, 2, 3 in the second; 2, 5, 5 in the third; and 2, 3, 4 in the fourth.

The challenge arises when, after writing in fingerings, the pianist realizes that the counting is a bit tricky as well, and all those numbers start to get a little confusing:

The same musical score as above, but with counting lines written below the left hand. The first measure is counted '1 - 2 - 3', the second '1 2 3', the third '1 - 2 - 3', and the fourth '1 2 3'.

And what if, after a few times through, she realizes that she keeps playing a C instead of that B in the last measure of the left hand, and that while she’s at it, reminds that the notes in the 4th measure are different from those in the 2nd wouldn’t hurt? Things get pretty messy:

The same musical score as above, but with corrections. In the fourth measure of the left hand, the notes are now B, A, and G. The counting lines below are '1 - 2 - 3', '1 2 3', '1 - 2 - 3', and '1 2 3'. The letter 'B' is written above the first note of the fourth measure, and 'A' and 'G' are written above the second and third notes respectively.

¹ Never say “all.”

Experienced performers develop habitual locations for each type of information, so that if more than one is needed the page doesn't start to look like a pencil-covered mess. Here's the system Prof. Glasgow uses.

Fingerings go outside the staff (above the right hand and below the left hand). Be sure to keep the finger numbers stacked in the correct order, high to low, regardless of which hand you're notating:

A musical score for a piano piece. The right hand (treble clef) has two chords in the first measure, each with fingerings 5 and 3 written above. The second measure has a whole rest. The third measure has two chords with fingerings 5 and 4 written above. The fourth measure has a whole rest. The left hand (bass clef) has a quarter note in the first measure with a '1' below. The second measure has a quarter-note triplet with fingerings 1, 2, and 3 below. The third measure has a quarter note with a '2' below. The fourth measure has a quarter-note triplet with fingerings 2, 3, and 4 below.

Counting goes between the staves—because the timeline is consistent between the hands, this helps the performer make sure the two hands are in sync for the duration of the piece:

The same musical score as above, but with counting added between the staves. The first measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves. The second measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves. The third measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves. The fourth measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves.

Note names, then, go as close to the notehead as possible—but *to the left* of the notehead wherever possible, so the eye sees the correctly written letter before it gets to the note you've been playing wrong!

The same musical score as above, but with note names added to the left hand. The first measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves. The second measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves. The third measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves and 'B.' written to the left of the notehead. The fourth measure has '1 + 2 + 3 +' between the staves and 'B.', 'A.', and 'G.' written to the left of the noteheads.

Compare this example to the third example on the other side of the page. Both include the same information. Which is easier to understand?